

CONSUMER ORGANIZATIONS: IMPORTANT RESOURCES FOR VR AGENCIES

Periodically, the commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) disseminates memoranda to the RSA Senior Management Team to provide information and guidance on the implementation of priority initiatives or strategies. Last fall, Joanne Wilson, RSA commissioner, distributed the following Commissioner's Memorandum (CM 04-01) regarding the importance of consumer organizations as valuable resources for vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies. The memorandum clearly articulates the potential role of consumers in empowering persons with disabilities and the agencies that serve them.



MEMORANDUM

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
REHABILITATION SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
CENTRAL OFFICE**

**COMMISSIONER'S MEMORANDUM
CM 04-01
Date: October 3, 2003**

TO: RSA Senior Management Team

FROM: Joanne Wilson
Commissioner

SUBJECT: Consumer Organizations: Important Resources for VR Agencies

BACKGROUND

Consumer organizations, whose membership and officers are comprised of a majority of individuals with disabilities, are an invaluable resource for State vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies. These organizations provide a network of individuals whose knowledge and experiences can significantly supplement the efforts of a VR agency in meeting its mission and in empowering persons with disabilities to achieve their employment and independent living goals. Consumer organizations can provide experience-based information, technical assistance, access to role models and mentors, disability-specific training, job matching, advocacy on behalf of persons with disabilities and the needs of the public VR program, and a variety of other services that VR agencies would find useful in working with persons with disabilities. Whether representing individuals with mental illness, cognitive disabilities, physical disabilities, or individuals from a combination of these groups, consumer organizations specialize in empowering individuals with disabilities to achieve independence and self-sufficiency.

The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) is committed to leveraging the contributions of community organizations comprised of individuals with disabilities. To this end, RSA is developing initiatives to draw upon the contributions of consumer organizations by making their services a more integral resource to the VR program. These initiatives are designed to enhance the effectiveness of the VR system with the practical expertise and knowledge of persons with disabilities who

have successfully overcome barriers in achieving their goals. For example, RSA is funding a mentoring initiative in which students with disabilities will be connected with mentors with disabilities, who possess the practical knowledge and personal experiences requisite to help the students effectively transition to adulthood. These mentors can offer transition-age youth information, support, and hope derived from first-hand and personal experiences that enable them to serve as real-life examples of what people with disabilities can achieve.

This Commissioner's Memorandum (CM) more fully describes both this mentoring initiative and other available opportunities for State VR agencies to utilize the unique contributions that consumer organizations can make throughout the VR process ranging from direct interaction with VR participants to meaningful impact upon systemic issues, such as statewide planning and policy development. RSA considers the development of strong working relationships between State VR agencies and grass-roots consumer organizations to be pivotal in ensuring that agency efforts are effective in meeting the needs of the various disability populations the agencies are serving and the realization of successful outcomes.

MENTORING

The expectations and beliefs that individuals with disabilities have about their own abilities, potential, and competence inevitably influence their choices throughout the VR process. All too frequently, individuals create self-imposed limits based on poor role modeling, lack of disability-specific information, and negative misconceptions about their disability. Ultimately, these self-imposed limits negatively affect their employment outcomes and quality of life. Connecting individuals being served by the VR program with mentors who have disabilities, who possess practical knowledge and firsthand experience, and who have achieved high-quality employment and independence through their participation in the VR process will help guide VR participants to make positive choices regarding their programs and their lives.

Furthermore, while all students encounter difficulties during their school years, many of the challenges encountered by students with disabilities are wholly unique. Students with disabilities often are unable to find summer and part-time employment, struggle with social acceptance and negative stereotypes about their disabilities, are not encouraged or fail to participate in extracurricular activities, and are not always taught the disability-specific skills and techniques they need to succeed at school and life. As a result, dropout rates among students with disabilities are significantly higher than those of the non-disabled population, and their college enrollment is approximately five times less than the general public's. The lack of opportunity to gain the experience and confidence through job training and summer employment combined with low expectations and minimal social skills or disability-specific techniques leave them ill-prepared to enter the workforce.

While mentoring can greatly enhance the experiences of all participants in the VR program, it is a natural and necessary component of any complete package of transition services in light of the significant impact role models can have on youth as they mature. Mentoring provides students with disabilities increased opportunities to explore vocational interests and develop work habits, skills, and attitudes necessary for meaningful careers. Mentors, or role models, with whom students can identify, and who have shared interests, can have a positive impact that will last a lifetime. Thus, providing mentoring services to students with disabilities should be considered in the development of both the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).

To highlight the important role of mentoring in the transition process, RSA has developed a mentoring initiative for transition-aged youth and young adults with disabilities. Projects funded

under this initiative will focus on providing mentoring services to students with disabilities to gain the necessary skills, confidence, and education to effectively transition from school to high-quality employment and independence. The mentoring program established under this initiative will accomplish this goal through the development of collaborative partnerships between State VR agencies and consumer-controlled organizations. From the ranks of these organizations, mentors will be identified and matched with students with disabilities. These mentors will possess the practical knowledge and personal experience requisite to help students effectively transition to adulthood and overcome the barriers that typically are associated with a particular disability. The mentors will not only serve as powerful role models, but will support students by assisting them with career and professional development, helping them to develop their life skills and disability-specific techniques that enhance independence, assisting them to attain their academic goals, and providing them with encouragement and moral support.

The initiative focuses on the following objectives:

- Increasing academic achievement and participation in post-secondary education.
- Assisting students to navigate through service delivery systems that may assist them in their transition.
- Developing and improving the self-confidence, community integration, work, self-determination, advocacy and decision-making skills of the students.
- Increasing high-quality employment outcomes achieved by the students.

This effort has begun with a few, small demonstrations and will grow into a national network of mentoring programs. In fiscal year (FY) 2002, RSA funded two mentoring demonstration projects. In FY 2003, RSA funded one project in the amount of \$1 million over a five-year period to develop an information base on promising mentoring models upon which the proposed effort in FY 2004 can build. The Administration, through its FY 2004 budget request, proposes a more expansive effort that will focus on activities to diffuse mentoring programs within State VR agencies.

ADJUSTMENT TO DISABILITY

Adjustment-to-disability services (or adjustment services) are critically important to empowering many individuals with significant disabilities to pursue, achieve, and sustain high-quality employment outcomes in integrated settings. Adjustment services are a comprehensive and integrated set of services, including counseling, mentoring and other services, designed to provide individuals with disabilities with confidence, interpersonal and disability-specific skills, and a positive attitude toward disability that they may require to achieve competitive employment, community integration, and independence. This set of services, which differs from medical rehabilitation services, may consist of teaching orientation and mobility to individuals who are blind, or training in the use of communication aids for those who are blind, deaf, or unable to speak. The provision of such services through the VR program directly assists individuals in adjusting to living and working with a disability, thus greatly enhancing their capabilities to achieve long-term success in the workplace.

Through collaboration with consumer organizations and accessing their expertise, VR agencies can ensure that sufficient and appropriate adjustment services are made available to individuals with disabilities as integral components of their rehabilitation planning. Consumer organizations are excellent resources for information regarding the specific adjustment services required by individuals with disabilities, especially with respect to the development of IPEs appropriate to the needs of

particular individuals with disabilities. In addition, consumer organizations possess a wealth of experience and knowledge concerning the providers of adjustment services; thus, they are well prepared to assist VR counselors and individuals in the selection of the providers best suited to deliver these essential services.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE IPE

The IPE is the vehicle by which individuals participate in the VR program and, ultimately, achieve high-quality employment and independence. It is a planning tool by which individuals identify their employment goals, as well as the specific services and providers needed to achieve those goals. In developing an IPE, individuals require accurate information and perspective in order to make informed and empowering choices. To this end, the State VR agency is required to provide individuals with options for developing the IPE, including the assistance of qualified VR counselors or other persons.

In setting forth the options available to individuals for the development of the IPE, section 102(b)(1)(A) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (Act) states that "...the designated State unit shall provide the eligible individual or the individual's representative...with information on the individual's options for developing an individualized plan for employment, including - (A) information on the availability of assistance, to the extent determined to be appropriate by the eligible individual, from a qualified vocational rehabilitation counselor in developing all or part of the individualized plan for employment for the individual, and the availability of technical assistance in developing all or part of the individualized plan for employment for the individual" (emphasis added). The implementing regulations reinforce the option of the individual to use alternative sources for assistance with IPE development by permitting eligible individuals to develop their IPEs without assistance, or with help from a variety of sources, including qualified VR counselors employed by the agency, qualified VR counselors not employed by the agency, and other unspecified "resources" (34 CFR 361.45(c)(1)).

Consumer organizations are an ideal resource from which VR agencies and individuals can seek assistance when preparing IPEs. Consumer organizations possess extensive knowledge of the VR program and its processes, service providers, and, most importantly, the disability-related and vocational needs of persons with disabilities. By accessing this important resource, both VR counselors and individuals can utilize the expertise of consumer organizations in order to develop IPEs that best meet the needs of the individuals. Such collaboration will serve to connect individuals with people who have firsthand knowledge of disabilities and the VR process, enabling them to make fully informed and effective choices.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Because consumer organizations represent the collective voice of their members, they are able to offer experience-based input on the effectiveness of a State VR agency's policies, procedures and practices as they affect applicants and individuals eligible for VR services. Strong partnerships and productive dialogue between VR agencies and these organizations can lead to better programming, better agency performance, and, ultimately, better outcomes for persons with disabilities.

In addition to being significant contributors to a VR agency's efforts to evaluate itself and its efforts to empower persons with disabilities to achieve high-quality employment outcomes, consumer organizations can play important roles in the conduct of the comprehensive statewide triennial assessment of the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities required by section 101(a)(15)(A) of the Act. The input of these organizations can be particularly helpful with respect

to the identification of the nature and scope of the needs of individuals who are minorities or who have been unserved or underserved by the State VR agency.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Prior to the adoption of any new or revised policies or procedures governing the provision of services under the State's VR program, section 101(a)(16)(A) of the Act requires a State VR agency to conduct public meetings throughout the State to provide the public, including individuals with disabilities, the opportunity to comment on the proposed policies or procedures. In this regard, the agency is also required to actively consult with the director of the Client Assistance Program (CAP), and, as appropriate, Indian tribes, tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian organizations.

Since the information gathered from these public meetings can be useful to a State VR agency's refinement and improvement of a proposed policy or procedure, the agency should make special efforts to inform consumer organizations of these meetings so that they have the opportunity to express their views, thus ensuring the voice of the larger disability community is heard.

In addition to soliciting public input prior to the adoption of any new or revised policies or procedures at the required public meetings, section 101(a)(16)(B) of the Act also requires a State VR agency to take into account, in connection with matters of general policy relating to the administration of the VR State plan, the views of individuals who are receiving VR services or, as appropriate, their representatives; providers of VR services; the CAP director; and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), if the agency is required to have a SRC.

To address this statutory requirement, a VR agency can obtain the perspectives of individuals with disabilities through a variety of other mechanisms. For example, a VR agency can engage in ongoing consultation with consumer organizations by conducting regularly scheduled meetings between agency and organization leadership. Additionally, through participation on policy development committees or focus groups established to study specific areas of interest to the agency, representatives of consumer organizations can provide the agency with additional insight during the various stages of planning and policy development, by participating in initial discussions of the issues, commenting on proposed language, and, finally, by providing information on the effects of the implementation of policy changes on individuals.

IMMERSION ACTIVITIES

Individuals with disabilities can be truly empowered and in control of their futures only when they possess the information, education, training, confidence, and high expectations needed to make effective employment and life-related decisions. VR counselors play a vital role in the empowerment of individuals with disabilities. Counselors and other VR staff can achieve a unique perspective of the capabilities and employment potential of persons with disabilities through participation in activities through which they interact for extended periods of time directly with persons with disabilities in situations other than traditional professional counselor to consumer relationships. In addition, individuals with disabilities also can benefit immensely from participation in these same intensive and experiential "immersion" activities, as they learn from their peers and develop positive attitudes toward their disabilities.

Consumer organizations are ideal resources through which VR agencies can provide immersion activities for their staff and consumers alike. Immersion activities can range in duration and may include attendance at conferences sponsored by these organizations; ongoing participation in meetings and other activities conducted by local chapters and affiliates; and participation in

rehabilitation training programs. Consumer organizations can work with VR agencies to identify and coordinate those activities most appropriate for the needs of their staff and individual consumers. VR staff who have engaged in a variety of immersion activities report: an increased understanding of and sensitivity to disability culture; a greater knowledge of successful accommodation methods; a more positive view of the employment potential of individuals with disabilities; an increased comfort level in working with individuals with significant disabilities; and deeper insight into their own preconceptions of disability. By interacting for an extended period of time with persons with disabilities who function naturally and successfully in the performance of both life and employment skills, VR counselors and consumers can enrich their understanding of the lives of persons with disabilities, the barriers to employment which they have overcome, and those obstacles which they still face, either individually or collectively, on a daily basis.

STATE AGENCY IN-SERVICE TRAINING

Consumer organizations can assist a State VR agency in conducting relevant in-service training efforts that focus on particular disabilities. With their "real world" experiences in addressing various issues resulting from their disabilities with respect to preparing for and obtaining high-quality employment outcomes, representatives of consumer organizations can provide experience-based insight, information, and guidance to State VR agency staff that professional educators, trainers, or books simply cannot offer.

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

Consumer organizations provide established networks for dissemination of information and communication about services, special projects, proposed changes and trends in service delivery or resources, and profiles of agency successes. They are a ready source of referrals and can offer invaluable assistance in reaching culturally diverse or underserved groups to familiarize them with the services that the VR program has to offer. Finally, they can add a significant voice to policymakers on agency requests related to service provision.

SUMMARY

This CM describes various opportunities for collaboration between a VR agency and consumer organizations, and suggests several methods for fostering effective partnerships. VR agencies are encouraged to develop their own innovative practices that utilize the knowledge, expertise, and skills found within these organizations for the benefit of the individuals the agencies serve, thereby enhancing and strengthening the VR program itself.

Consumer organizations play a crucial role in the lives of people with disabilities. Consequently, their involvement in the VR program is fundamental to its success. In partnership with the VR program, these organizations can offer persons with disabilities support, opportunities, and hope. Whether through peer mentoring, leadership opportunities, role modeling, or disability-specific training, consumer organizations are invaluable resources for VR agencies, their partners, and individuals with disabilities alike. VR agencies can draw upon the collective talent of these organizations and the expertise of their individual members as they work to achieve high quality employment and full independence for persons with disabilities.

Any questions concerning this Commissioner's Memorandum should be addressed to Carol Dobak, at (202) 245-7325 or Carol.Dobak@ed.gov.